

Painting Freedom: Art from Detention

By Fiona Bolas

As you enter Adam Janali's Perth flat, you are confronted with powerful images which stare down at you from the walls. One depicts a human figure completely encased in bricks, with only a foot breaking through. Other paintings show faces of refugees staring out from behind walls and razor wire. Propped up against the walls are more paintings of people in despair and imprisonment.

They are the people we are not meant to see. The people who the government has told us are queue jumpers and terrorists. Yet in a week in which the Liberal Party has virtually imploded over the issue of mandatory detention, the plight of refugees is back in the headlines.

A Means of Escape

For the artist, Adam Janali, 27, the issue is one that never leaves him. Incarcerated for two and a half years in Port Hedland Detention Centre and for six months in Baxter Detention Centre, he used his artwork as his means of escape during this time. Now he has been released on a Temporary Protection Visa, he uses his artistic skill to raise public awareness of the inhumanity of detention.

Adam Janali is originally from Afghanistan. His people, the Hazara tribe, have been persecuted for over 120 years. Under the Taliban regime their treatment worsened until Janali realised that to save his

life he had to escape. He fled from his homeland in 2001.



© Adam Janali

Risking his life with a smuggler, he made the journey from Indonesia to Australia in a small boat with 350-400 other people. When he reached Australian shores, he was 'welcomed', he says, 'with a nice view of a fence'.

Scapegoat

It was an unfortunate time to arrive. Australia was a nation which perceived refugees as a threat. With boatloads of asylum seekers arriving regularly from upheaval and persecution, they became a scapegoat for public concerns about overcrowding and terrorism.

It was a misconception fuelled by the government. As history has shown, the Howard government's claims about parents throwing their children overboard were believed by the community and led to a coalition victory

at the 2002 Federal election. Then Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock's Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs ('DIMA') oversaw people detained for years in virtual prisons.

Worse than a jail

But they were not prisons. As Janali explains, the Detention Centre 'is like a jail, but worse than a jail. I've heard that the conditions in Australian jails are not so bad. At least in jail there is the opportunity to learn something like a trade. [In detention] you just kill the time by thinking about your future, about family'.

Upon arrival Janali and his fellow asylum seekers were told by representatives of DIMA that they were being taken to a place which was like a hotel. They were told their stay would last a few days, and then they would be free. But, Janali says, 'the few days became three years for me'.

Animal factory

Arriving at the Port Hedland Detention Centre they asked, 'Why is this fence around us?' They were informed by Detention Centre officials that it was to protect them from the dangerous wild animals which roamed the Australian countryside. Janali soon realised that the fence was not to keep animals out, but to keep them in. 'We were treated like animals. They called us by numbers, not by our name... it was a factory to transform the humans to animals'.

It was during his time in detention that Janali began to draw and paint. Never having done any artwork before ('In Afghanistan we were not allowed to paint') he saw a copy of *The West Australian* with a political cartoon about Phillip Ruddock and the 'children overboard' scandal. Straightaway he realised that he could use art to articulate feelings he couldn't yet explain in English.

He began to read art books sent to him by Australian friends. Without being able to speak much of the language at this time, it was a difficult and painstaking process. Each word in the art books had to be looked up in a dictionary to determine the meaning. He continued to practice [sic] and 'step by step' learned to paint and draw.

Human duty to help

From the beginning art represented to him a means by which to help himself and to help others in similar situations. He says it is the 'duty of a human' to try and make things better for other people. It is a philosophy he learned from the other side of Australia; those who campaign against our system of detention. 'When I came into the Detention Centre they sent letters without knowing us very good, so I said "they help us just because we are a human". Now I try to help anyone by my painting and do fundraising for humans'.

Janali began to use his art to connect with the Australian community outside the walls of the Detention Centre: 'I said ok now, I can take all

the painting and drawing and make a message and send them outside to let people know about our feelings, our suffering, and our situation'.

While in detention he sent some of his work to a refugee organisation in Melbourne on the understanding that they could sell the paintings and keep the proceeds. Janali says, 'the money goes to the organisation, not to me because I don't need the money. In the Detention centres we don't need money, we just need freedom'.



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Since being released he has continued to use his work in this way. Recently CARAD launched a fundraising event, 'Postcards from Detention', which featured Janali's work. Last year saw the release of an anthology of refugee's writing entitled, *Another Country*. Janali's painting of a caged woman graced the cover.

Exhibition planned

He is now planning to exhibit his paintings. But this may

prove a problem given his generosity with them. He has about 15 in his possession at the moment, but predicts there are about 25 others that he has given away either to refugee organisations, or to friends who have supported him during his difficult time in Australia.

He proudly, but modestly shows off the sketches he completed while in the Detention Centres. Many depict refugees with wire twisted around their bodies, trapped by both the walls of the Detention Centre, and the walls it creates inside their minds. A self portrait shows him simultaneously dreaming of Afghanistan, and being in detention. The half of his body in Afghanistan is muzzled, signifying the lack of free speech in his home country. Disturbingly, the half in Australia is muzzled with razor wire. There is also wire wrapped around his brain, symbolising he says, 'that they don't want you to think or speak in detention'.

Possibility of hope

Upheaval, trauma and flight are evident in his paintings. Yet there is another strong theme Janali paints; the possibility for hope. One painting depicts a white peace dove with 'freedom' emblazoned in red across its wingspan. He also paints images of the natural world, both because it was something he pined for in detention, and because he 'loves the green of nature'.

Eventually Janali was released from detention after three years. He recites the date from memory: 28 September



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2004. As to why it happened at this time, he is unsure: 'the same reason they refused me before, after three years they accepted, "oh your life's in danger if you go back"'. He is certain, however, that his release was linked to the refugee activists who protest against the Detention Centres. 'I think it's the pressure from the Australian people who support the refugees....if they didn't do anything, maybe I'd still be in the Detention Centre'.

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Janali originally settled in Perth because he had a friend here who could help with his transition into life on the outside. He has chosen to stay because he feels it is important to build up the profile of the refugee movement in Western Australia: 'I don't say that there is nobody here who supports the refugee, no there are. But we want to show other people that in Perth there is strong organisations

and strong people who work hard, and to raise our voice'.

No choice

While he enjoys the relative freedom he experiences in Australia, he is quick to point out that refugees do not emigrate just because they feel like a change. They come, he says, because they have no choice. They are forced to leave their homeland.

When asked whether he would still have made the journey to Australia had he known what awaited him, he thoughtfully pauses, then explains: 'If I don't have a problem I don't leave my country because it's my country, my family, my grandmother, my grandfather; all of them are there, my roots are there. But because the problem was there I was forced to leave and it's good that now I am here because I changed something....I changed from a fundamentalist and

became like a normal man. Now I'm a humanist and I believe that because we're all human, we have to care about that, about other humans'.

When questioned about whether he would advise other asylum seekers to come to Australia he is less sure. 'Under this government I say no because we die twice. Really we die twice, when we escape, and when we enter the Detention Centre...I don't wish for some people to leave their country to come here and face another problem. I wouldn't like what has happened to me in the Detention Centre to happen to others', he says.

Uncertain future

For Janali, the future is uncertain. His Temporary Protection Visa allows him to stay in Australia for three years. After that he could be deported back to Afghanistan. As he says, 'because you don't know what will happen to you after three years you can't make any decisions, you can't plan for your future, it's too hard'.

For now he has nearly completed an English course, and plans to study a more advanced one at Tuart College next semester. This, he hopes, will help him turn his hand to writing. His immediate plans are to try and get a studio in which to paint. His small flat fills with fumes when he works there.

His broader plans, true to character, involve helping other people. 'If I stay here I will keep doing the same thing and lead a simple life and help other people who need help'.